

What's so special about storytelling for social change?

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A new world requires new stories, but people will only listen to them when they themselves are included in the storyline. This requires a 'gear-shift' in conversations about radical action.

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While working in the belly of corporate communications some years ago, I stumbled across a storytelling night at Amsterdam's [Mezrab](#) cultural centre. Nude model drawing classes and the *Mahabharata* in Dutch were also on the menu, but it was the storytelling that caught my eye, hosted on an open stage by an Iranian storyteller by the name of [Sahand Sahbedivani](#).

Even through the candlelight and the smoke, the rapt attention on the faces of the audience made it clear that they loved the stories of human drama they were hearing, which was the opposite of my experience in my work. Despite the fact that I was working extremely hard to get the company's



stories more attention, they rarely ignited anything like this response in the public's imagination. The difference between a profit-making organisation and an alternative arts event was obvious but intriguing. Why did storytelling at Mezrab succeed while corporate communications generally fell flat? The answers are relevant to anyone who has a story to tell, and nowhere is that more important than in the field of social change.

Today, storytelling is wildly popular. It's seen as the key to succeeding in business, [strengthening organizational culture](#), and drumming up [support for advocacy and campaigns](#). But why is that? The first reason is obvious: climate change, inequality, violence and other challenges can't be solved by doing more of the same. We need new narratives that connect with peoples' deepest motivations and promote more radical action. Stories engage people at every level - not just in their minds but in their emotions, values and imaginations, which are the drivers of real change. So if we want to transform society, we must learn to tell - and listen to - a new set of stories about the world we want to create.

So far so good, but what actually makes for a good story in this sense? That's where my visits to Mezrab were so instructive. For one thing, the storytellers that got the most attention were not necessarily the funniest or wittiest. Instead, they were the ones that were most prepared to put their skin in the game, to state something that was uncomfortably close to how they saw the world. This radical subjectivity – perhaps the basis of all great art – is a crucial lesson for anyone who wants to communicate a complex topic. When we allow our own insights to organise the telling of a story, we give a more compelling account of events. Why? Because our deepest values are closest to

what we share with others.

Business is only now learning that telling a good story requires authenticity, as if bewildered by the discovery of truth. Storytelling in social movements is more advanced. In fact for those who work for social justice, the problem has not been making up good stories, but getting people to listen to the ones they have already. This can be especially hard when movements are very broad, and when the issues they deal with are so large in scope. But my storytelling sessions taught me another lesson that's useful in this context: even when the issues are large and complex, we feel compelled to listen when we ourselves are included in the storyline.

The danger of much current rhetoric is that justified frustration at injustice comes across in torrents of abuse. The parlous state of the economy, for example, is not just the fault of the bankers and politicians who have overspent, it's also something that involves all of us on a daily basis in our roles as consumers and producers, employers and employees, shareholders and borrowers. When anyone is marginalized or demonized in this context, they are less likely to be part of the solution, even if they have the power to make change.

The Mezrab storytellers were successful because they and their audience felt united with each other at some level, even if they might disagree on the surface. In myth, drastic opposites are often reconciled through elaborate plots and casts of characters. We can do the same in our own stories by not alienating the people we need to talk to or persuade. [Michael Margolis](#), a San Francisco-based 'story architect,' makes this point elegantly by asking that our stories of social change become *love stories*. His argument is that undermining belief systems – a necessary step in social change – requires an emphasis on shared values and commonality. These shared values can then be used to show when, why and how some people aren't living up to them in practice.

Stressing unity between divergent interests has often been the basis of effective change - look no further than the genesis of the European Union after World War Two. A more local example came in the wake of the [killing of British soldier Lee Rigby](#) by two self-proclaimed Muslims in Woolwich, southeast London, in 2013. This event outraged the far-right English Defence League (EDL) who organised a protest outside a mosque in York. Knowing of this plan and anticipating violence, members of the mosque invited the protestors in for tea and biscuits. In the discussion that followed, both parties realised that they had a common interest in ending extremist violence. The protestors' anger was successfully defused, and the day ended in an impromptu game of football.

The leader of the mosque, Mohamed El-Gomati, [initiated a dialogue](#) to identify elements of a shared culture among members of both the EDL and the Mosque. We can do the same with our own stories. Whenever there's a situation in which we're tempted to label one group as 'the other', telling a story that reveals shared values aids in the creation of new communities. The narrative ceases to be the property of one side's rightness over another side's error. Instead it becomes a story of co-creation and mutual responsibility.

Identifying common value is attractive, not just to those with whom we want to communicate directly, but also to other listeners who have to be part of the conversation. Focusing on commonality puts everyone in a stronger position to undermine belief systems and lay out new possibilities for social change. That, at least, is something I learned from corporate communications.

Where the business community excels is in its story of possibilities. After all, branding is simply an exercise in creating the idea that something is valuable, so that others will buy into it - in this case literally. Where these ideas about value are already present - as in social movements - much of the job is done, but not all. In addition to telling stories that inspire people's imagination, movements can also activate their energies for action by including a greater sense of concrete possibilities in the stories they want to tell. And that requires something of a 'gear-shift' in conversations about the nature of radical action.

Myth, says [Martin Shaw](#)

, is not just about awakening a past that is forgotten; it's also about describing the possibilities of the present. Values

- as the core of all good stories - can lay the foundations for social transformation by simultaneously undermining beliefs and retaining some continuity, so that people are not immobilized by the changes taking place around them. When stories are deeply grounded in values, they can communicate a vision and not merely a picture of the realities we face.

These visions - as enablers of action - are necessary to the path of social and political change. Those on the Left are often criticised for pointing out the problems rather than presenting some solutions. By identifying the values that underpin our activities and weaving them into a story of how the world might look, we will become more effective at opening hearts and minds to accommodate a positive future.